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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: *review_editor@platypus1917.org*. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

The Platypus Review is funded by:

- The University of Chicago Student Government
- Dalhousie Student Union
- Loyola University of Chicago
- School of the Art Institute of Chicago Student Government
- The New School
- New York University
- The Platypus Affiliated Society



The Platypus Review

Issue #46 | May 2012

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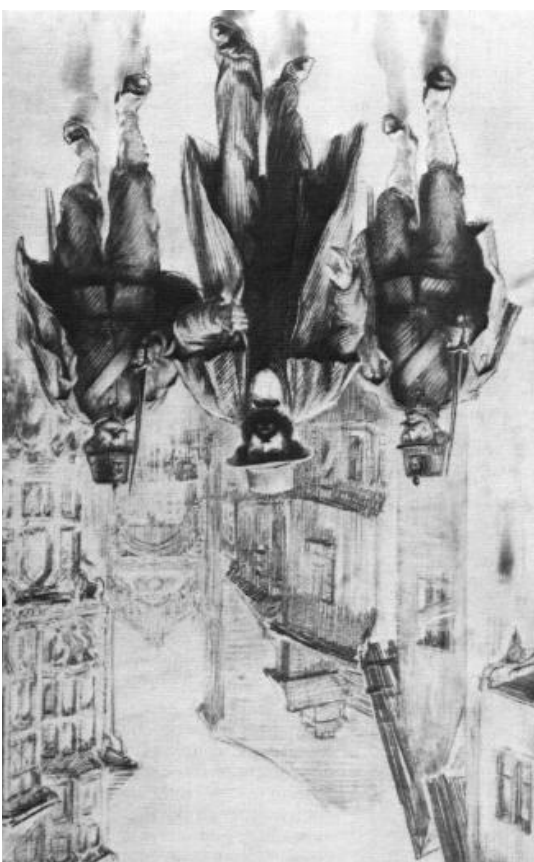
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at the same time a historical transformation of the con-
ested in gaining profit and not in granting him any form
Manchester, or point out that his employer is only inter-
tions for the worker in the crowded tenement houses of
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one hand, we live in a most unfree moment. One could
taneously posing new problems of unfreedom. On the
capitalism offers new forms of freedom while simult-
PN: This gets back to the question of whether or not
modern wage-workers.

obedient to their masters. This has nothing to do with
within these workhouses, who would therefore be more
the formation of an “indigenous class” of workers born
a great advocate of these workhouses. He envisioned
who claimed to be a great reformer, but was truthfully

Marx, arrested: Brussels, 1848. Sketch by N. Khukov, 1930s.



word. On the workhouses, I quote Benham at length,
services. That is, they were not free in any sense of the
Mandeville writes that the worker must attend religious
They were not modern wage-laborers. For instance,
transferred to America, they were more like slaves
ery form of liberty. The [indentured] servants who were
the inhabitants of the workhouses were deprived of ev-
liberal liberty, as well. I have quoted, for instance, that
geiois-liberal revolution, the servants were without even
their servants and slaves. In the first phase of the bour-
government, could impose a new regime of control over

class of property-owners, once free of the control of the
an emancipatory process. But we must add that this
and convey their opinions is of course an expression of
according to which men have the right to think freely
emancipation and dis-empowerment. The statement
DL: I would continue to stress this entanglement of
in the seventeenth century?

Or was this already a reactionary position to take, even
made through this particular form of private property?
tical necessarily that demands of liberty could only be
made against the order of the king? Was it merely a his-
grounds on which certain demands of liberty can be
least in England, doesn’t private property become the

Pam C. Nogales C.: In the seventeenth century, at
be forever obedient to their masters.

of workers who can increase productivity but who would
tic, idealistic, and eugenicist vision to create a new race
not a materialistic vision. On the contrary, it is a futuris-
and apes in order to create a new race of slave. That is
of the possibility of sexual relations between black men
role in the French Revolution, in which Sieyès dreams
by Sieyès, a French liberal who played a considerable
manly of the superior classes. I quote in my book a text
while, on the other hand, they celebrated the great hu-
rists, on the one hand, dehumanized the working-man,
the materialistic vision of the world. These liberal theo-
liberal tradition, I don’t believe that this has to do with

DL: On the dehumanization of the working class in the
dehumanization?
materialism just as easily as it might indicate deliberate
reflect these thinkers’ encounter with British and French
wrote of the “machine-man.” Might this language re-
“common to Man and Beast,” and La Mettrie famously
Hobbes claimed that there was a sensate understanding
which he refers to wage-laborers as “work machines.”
lection from one of Abbé Sieyès’s private notebooks in
horses and other beasts of burden. You also offer a se-
Mandeville, and Smith in which they liken workers to

RW: You compile some disturbing passages from Locke,
there was no formal liberty either.

all. Not only was there no wealth, or material liberty;
tion camps. In the workhouses there was no liberty at
approximating later internment camps and concentra-
I also describe the conditions in the workhouses as
denace. Here too we can speak of terroristic legisla-
penalty must be applied even in the absence of any evi-
workers, the laws must be very strict, and that the death
the fact that to maintain order and stability among the
of liberalism. Bernard de Mandeville is very open about
very poor, they were even without the formal liberties
of the capitalist metropolis were not only destitute and
ing to have some results. In my view, the workingmen
this new working class needed more time before start-
was not the program of the liberals. The struggle of
to emphasize the point that this possibility of liberation
tions for a great transformation of society. But I have

tion of an urban proletariat creates the necessary condi-
DL: Of course, you are right if you stress that the forma-
a new form of unfreedom and immiseration?
possibilities that didn’t exist before? Or was this simply
ing class), to what extent did this open up revolutionary
the cities, where they joined the newly emerging work-
peasants thus uprooted were often forced to move to
to the development of an urban proletariat (since the
RW: Insofar as the dis-emancipation of the serfs led
rule of the ruling class became extremely terroristic.
We can see that after the liberal Glorious Revolution the
even minor transgressions, became punishable by death.
became very widespread. Every crime against property,
cipation. After the Glorious Revolution, the death penalty
we can see this dialectic of emancipation and dis-eman-
and inaugurate a great historical tragedy. In this case, too,
way the landowners were able to expropriate the peasants
landed aristocracy became free from the king, but in this
DL: “Glorious Revolution” of 1688–1689 as a *coup d’état*. The
DL: It was Marx himself who characterized the so-called

either unavailable or unthinkable before?
cipatory possibilities did capitalism open up that were
epochal and unprecedented event? What, if any, eman-
which helped usher in the age of capitalism, a truly
regulating social production? Do you consider this shift,
sition to the wage relationship as the standard mode of
obscurating the world-historical significance of the tran-
another—paid and unpaid labor—isn’t there a danger of
By effectively collapsing these two categories into one
the uncompensated, obligatory labor that preceded it.

RW: You seem to vacillate on the issue of the move
a worsening of the conditions of slavery in general.
ty-owner became free, but this greater freedom meant
between emancipation and dis-emancipation. The proper-
In this case we can see very well the entanglement be-
property-owners over their property, including slaves.
absolute monarchy, Locke affirmed the total power of

pation. In leading the struggle against the control of the
ery, Locke is of course a representative of dis-eman-
emancipation, but while celebrating or legitimizing slav-
the absolute monarchy, Locke is a representative of
DL: Yes, in Locke we see the contrary. While criticizing
ing class), to what extent did this open up revolutionary
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DL: It was Marx himself who characterized the so-called

time a critic of slavery and colonialism.
defender of the absolute monarchy, but was at the same
the one hand and Jean Bodin on the other. Bodin was a
In my book, I develop a comparison between Locke on
cases, he acts as a representative of dis-emancipation.
hand, Locke is a great champion of slavery. And in this
the absolute power of the monarchy. But on the other
cizes against the absolute power of the king. He asserts
the necessity of defending the liberty of citizens against
an aspect of emancipation. For instance, Locke polemi-
other. Of course we can see in the history of liberalism
and dis-emancipation are strongly connected to one an-
epochal and unprecedented event? What, if any, eman-
forces. What I stress is that sometimes emancipation
Marx speaks about is a confrontation between these
derstanding the history of liberalism. The class struggle
emancipation and dis-emancipation is the key to un-
Domenico Losurdo: I believe that this dialectic between

ogy? From where did this logic ultimately stem?
of emancipation and dis-emancipation in liberal ideal-
Ross Wolfe: How would you characterize the antinomy

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On March 17, 2012, Ross Wolfe and Pam C. Nogales C.
Losurdo, the author, most recently, of Liberalism: A
Counter-History (2011). The full video is available online
at <http://vimeo.com/38923840>. What follows is an ed-
ited transcript of their conversation.

Pam C. Nogales C. and Ross Wolfe

Liberalism and Marx
An interview with Domenico Losurdo

Losurdo, continued from page 1

ception of a subject in society that has implications beyond its manifestation in its present moment? After all, the worker is not identical with his social activity. He, as a *bourgeois subject*, has the *right* to work. Does bourgeois right point beyond itself and thus prove irreducible to how it immediately appears?

DL: Some theorists from the ruling class end up inspiring other classes that were not foreseen as participants in liberal right. Consider Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the slave revolution in Santo Domingo, which later became Haiti. How can we explain this great revolution? We see in France the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. In the original version of this document, the *Rights of Man* did not include colonial peoples or the blacks. But we see Toussaint L'Ouverture who read this proclamation and claimed these rights for the blacks, as well. And we have this great revolution as a result. This is not a spontaneous consequence of liberalism, however. On the contrary, Toussaint L'Ouverture was obliged to struggle against the French liberals of the time, who admired the conditions that obtained in the southern United States of America and strove to continue the oppression of the black slaves. In Santo Domingo, the slaveholders were at first positively impressed by the French Revolution. They thought this meant freedom from the control of the king, such that they could now freely enjoy slavery, and their property, the slaves. Toussaint L'Ouverture drew the opposite conclusion, and thus became the organizer of one of the greatest revolutions in history.

PN: Concerning the radical inspiration for the framework you set up between Toussaint and the French Revolution, the striking thing about the Haitian Revolution is that it caused a division within France. It was not simply Toussaint versus the French liberals; the Haitian Revolution actually caused the French liberals to split and led to disarray. It raised another problem: Insofar as France could militarily continue to defend itself from counterrevolutionary forces in Europe, at this particular moment, it still depended on colonial production. It therefore seems to me that the Haitian Revolution posed the problem of the radicalism of liberalism straightforwardly and there were a number of responses. Is it possible to call Toussaint a liberal because he believed in the promises of liberalism?

DL: No! Toussaint was a Jacobin. Between the Jacobins and the liberals there was a great deal of struggle. If we read all the authors who are generally classified as liberal—for instance Constant, de Tocqueville, and so on—they spoke very strongly against Jacobinism. For these liberal authors, Jacobinism was something horrible. I don't agree, therefore, with your claim that there was a "split" within the liberal parties of France. Jacobinism is in my interpretation a form of radicalism, because they appealed not only to the liberation of the slaves "from above," but struggled together with the slaves in order to overthrow slavery. After the fall of the Jacobins in France, the new government began to immediately work for the restoration of slavery. The French slave-owners had acclaimed the first stage of the French Revolution, since they thought they could then freely exercise control over their slaves. After the advent of Jacobinism and the radicalization of the Revolution, the liberals went to the United States and expressed their admiration.

RW: Could you elaborate on the historical and conceptual distinction you draw between liberalism, on the one hand, and radicalism, on the other?

DL: Even if we conceive of radicalism as the continuation of liberalism, we should not forget that, for instance in the United States, even the formal abolition of slavery was the consequence of a terrible conflict, a war of secession. We don't see a direct continuity between liberalism and the abolition of slavery, because this liberation was only made possible by a protracted Civil War. But Lincoln, too, was not a representative of radicalism because he never appealed to the slaves to emancipate themselves. Only in the final stage of the War of Secession, in order to add more soldiers in the struggle against the South, did Lincoln agree to let some black soldiers fight.

It is another fact that, in the history of liberalism, Robespierre is not considered a liberal, but a strong enemy of liberalism. In the French Revolution, it was Robespierre who abolished slavery, but only after the great revolution in Haiti. He was then compelled to recognize that slavery was over.

The author who makes the best impression on the issue of slavery is Adam Smith. Smith was for a despotic government that would forcibly abolish slavery. But Smith never thought of the slaves as catalysts of their own liberation. So on the one hand, Adam Smith condemns and criticizes slavery very harshly. But if we ask him what was in his eyes the freest country of his time, in the final judgment, Smith answers that it is England.

If we look at the history of the American continents, we can ask: Which was the most liberal country? I believe it was America. But now, if we ask the question: Which was the country that had the greatest difficulty in the emancipation of the slaves? Again, it was the United States.

But if we consider the succession of emancipation in the American continents, we see Haiti first, followed by the countries of Latin America (Venezuela, Mexico, and so on), and only later the United States of America. If we read the development of the world between the United States and Mexico, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the United States—after defeating Mexico, after annexing Texas—reintroduced slavery into these territories where it had already been abolished. This, in my eyes, demonstrates that we cannot consider the abolition of slavery as a consequence of liberalism.

RW: How would you account for the admiration of Marx for a figure like Lincoln, who created the conditions (through war) for the emancipation of the slaves?

DL: Of course Marx was right in his admiration for Lincoln. Lincoln was a great personality, and Marx had the merit to understand that the abolition of slavery would bring about great progress. Why do I say this? Because in utopian socialism, there were those who constructed

this argument: "Yes, capitalism is slavery. Black slavery is only another form of slavery. Why should we choose between the Union and the Confederacy? We see in North and South only two different forms of slavery." Lassalle, for instance, was of this opinion. Marx understood very well that these two different forms of slavery—wage-slavery and slavery in its most direct form—were not equivalent. The South was for the expansion of slavery.

PN: For Marx, what was really at stake in the Civil War were the historical gains made by the bourgeois revolutions, on which any proletarian revolution would have to depend. And insofar as liberalism in its post-1848 moment had begun to undermine the promises of the bourgeois revolutions, it was no longer revolutionary. Do you think that with the relationship between Marx and the American Civil War, there was a certain promise that, insofar as slavery could be abolished, bourgeois right could potentially be radicalized?

DL: I am critical of some ideas of Marx, but not the enthusiasm with which he greeted the struggle of Lincoln or the Northern Union. In this case Marx was correct. But Marx spoke of the bourgeois revolutions as provid-



Maximilien Luce, *Une rue à Paris en Mai 1871 ou La commune*, oil on canvas, 222.5 cm x 151 cm, 1903–1905 (Musée d'Orsay).

ing political emancipation. Perhaps he didn't see the aspect of dis-emancipation. We can make a comparison with the middle of the nineteenth century: the U.S. and Mexico. In Mexico, no bourgeois revolution took place. In the U.S. we must say that the American Revolution was a form of bourgeois revolution. Comparing these two countries, we see that in Mexico, slavery was abolished. In the U.S. slavery remained very strong. Why should we say that in the U.S. the political emancipation was greater than in Mexico? I don't see why.

RW: In explaining the manifold "exclusion clauses" that restricted the application of bourgeois rights to certain privileged groups or individuals, you use the old dichotomy of the "sacred" and "profane." According to this model, those fortunate enough to live inside the boundaries of this "sacred space" at any given moment can be said to inhabit the "community of the free," while those who fall outside of its domain are meanwhile relegated to the "profane space" of unfreedom. Why do you associate freedom with sanctity, and unfreedom with profanity?

DL: In this religious analogy, the "sacred space" is, of course, the space that is more highly valued than any other. With liberal ideology, we see a religious attitude. But that isn't the most important point, because even in normal language, "sacred" has a more positive meaning. Regardless of whether one is religious, when people speak of something that is "sacred," what this means is that this thing has a particular importance.

RW: How do you account for the rise of nationalism, the role it played in carving out the "sacred space" of the "community of the free"? Nationalism goes virtually unmentioned in your account. Lost, then, is the patriotic particularity that emerged opposite Enlightenment universality at the outset of the eighteenth century. In your work on Heidegger, you draw on the sociologist Tönnies's distinction between "society" [*Gesellschaft*] and "community" [*Gemeinschaft*] to explain the exclusivist connotations of the ideology of the national or folk community (the *Volksgemeinschaft* promoted by the Nazis).¹ Insofar as it redirected the spiritual energies traditionally invested in religion to the nation, might this be the root of the "sacred space" that you associate with the (national) "community of the free"?

DL: Regarding "sacred space" and "profane space": I make a comparison with religion because religion proceeds in this way. Profane derives from a Latin word. *Fanum* was the temple or church. *Profanum* was what was outside the church. That is the distinction that we find already in the first phase of religious consciousness. Liberalism proceeds in the same way—we have the *fanum*, or temple, which is the space of the community of the free. *Profanum* is for the others, those outside of this space.

Why do I use this formulation for the community of the free? I don't believe that the category of "individualism" is adequate to the description of liberal society. "Liberalism" and "individualism" are self-congratulatory categories. Why? If we consider individualism, for example, as the theory according to which every individual man or woman has the right to liberty, emancipation, and self-expression—that is not what we see in liberal society. We have spoken of the different forms of exclusion, of colonial peoples, of workingmen, and women. Therefore, this category is not correct.

RW: But is it liberal society or the national community that is free? In your study on Heidegger, you distinguish between the more universal category of "society," the *socius* or *Gesellschaft*, and the more particular category of "community," the *communitas* or *Gemeinschaft*. Isn't this distinction useful here?

DL: If we consider the history of liberalism, we see on the one hand a "community of the free" that tends to be transnational. But on the other hand, we already see nationalism in this liberal society. For instance, Burke speaks of "the English people," a people in whose "blood" there is a love of liberty. There is a celebration of the English people. The ideology of nationalism was already present in liberalism. England—though not only England—claimed to be a special nation, a nation involved in a project of liberty. Of course in the twentieth century we have a new situation, where Heidegger celebrates the German nation.

PN: Isn't the transformation of concepts like nationalism symptomatic of a deeper problem in liberalism itself? Doesn't the shift that takes place in 1848 indicate the conservative (and thus reactionary) transformation of the liberal tradition, because a latent conflict

within bourgeois society was only now being historically manifested? Since you raised the criticism of how Marx conceived of bourgeois revolutions, I would like to talk about the relationship of liberalism to Marxism, specifically in the moment of the mid-nineteenth century. To what extent would you say that the success of a radical or Marxist conception of revolution would be the *negation* of liberal society, and to what extent would you say that it would be the *fulfillment* of liberal society?

DL: One can find a new definition of liberalism and say that the October Revolution of 1917 was a liberal revolution—why not? But in normal language, the October Revolution is not considered a liberal revolution. All the liberal nations of the world opposed the Bolshevik Revolution.

Marx does not speak at any great length about liberalism. He speaks about capitalism and bourgeois societies, which claimed to be liberal. I criticize Marx because he treats the bourgeois revolutions one-dimensionally, as an expression of political emancipation. Marx makes a distinction between political emancipation and social emancipation. Social or human emancipation will be, in Marx's eyes, the result of proletarian revolution. On the other hand, Marx says the political emancipation that is the result of bourgeois revolution represents progress.

Again, I don't accept this one-sided definition of political emancipation, because it implied the continuation and worsening of slavery. In my book I quote several contemporary U.S. historians who claim that the American Revolution was, in reality, a "counter-revolution." Why do I quote these historians? They write that if we consider the case of the natives or the blacks, their conditions became *worse* after the American Revolution. Of course the condition of the white community became much better. But I repeat: We have numerous U.S. historians who consider the American Revolution to be, in fact, a counter-revolution. The opinion of Marx in this case is one-sided. Perhaps he knew little about the conditions in America during the American Revolution. He knew the War of Secession well, but perhaps the young Marx was not familiar with the earlier history of the U.S.

Another example of the one-sidedness of the young Marx can be found in *On The Jewish Question*. He speaks in this text of the U.S. as a country of "accomplished political emancipation." In this case, his counter-example is France. In France, he claimed there was discrimination based on wealth and opportunity. This discrimination was disappearing, and was now almost non-existent, in the U.S. But there was slavery in the U.S. at this time. Why should we say that the U.S. during the time of slavery had "accomplished political emancipation"?

RW: "Radicalism," as you have been defining it, would be liberalism without exclusion. If one were to get rid of the division between the "sacred space" and "profane space," it would just be liberalism for all. Insofar as radicalism purports to remove any distinction between those who are inside and those outside the realm of freedom, and thereby bring everyone into the "sacred space" of freedom, wouldn't radicalism to some extent just be universal liberalism?

DL: It is impossible to universalize in this way. For instance, colonial wars were for the universalization of the condition of the white slave-owners. That was the universality proclaimed by colonialism. The universalization of liberal rights to excluded groups was not a

spontaneous consequence of liberalism, but resulted from forces outside liberalism. These forces were, however, in some cases inspired by certain declarations, for instance of the *Rights of Man*.

In speaking of the enduring legacy of liberalism, I have never said that we have nothing to learn from liberalism. There are two primary components of the legacy of liberalism. First, and perhaps the most important point: Liberalism has made the distinction between "sacred space" and "profane space" that I have spoken about. But liberalism has the great historical and theoretical merit of having taught *the limitation of power* within a determined, limited community. Yes, it is only for the community of the free, but still it is of great historical importance. On this score, I counterpose liberalism to Marxism, and rule in favor of liberalism. I have criticized liberalism very strongly, but in this case I stress the greater merits of liberalism in comparison to Marxism.

Often, Marxism has spoken of the *disappearance* of power as such—not the limitation of power, but its disappearance—the withering of the state and so on. This vision is a messianic vision, which has played a very negative role in the history of socialism and communism. If we think that power will simply disappear, we do not feel the obligation to limit power. This vision had terrible consequences in countries like the Soviet Union.

RW: So you believe that historical Marxism's theorization of the eventual "abolition" of the state, or the "withering away" of the state—as Lenin, following Engels, put it—was misguided?

DL: Totally misguided!

RW: So do you feel that society can never autonomously govern itself without recourse to some sort of external entity, something like the state? Must the state always exist?

DL: I do not believe society can exist without regulation, without laws. Something must ensure obedience to the laws, and in this case the "withering away" of the state would mean the "withering away" of rights, of the rule of law. Gramsci rightly says that civil society, too, can be a form of power and domination. If we conceive the history of the United States, the most oppressive forms of domination did not take the shape of state domination, but came from civil society. The settlers in the American West independently carried out the expropriation, deportation, and even extermination in more extensive ways than the state. Sometimes, even if only partially, the federal government has tried to place limits on this phenomenon. Representing civil society as the expression of liberty—this is nonsense that has nothing to do with real Marxism.

Marx himself speaks of the despotism in the capitalist factory, which is not exercised by the state, but rather by civil society. And Marx, against this despotism, proposed the interference of the state into the private sphere of civil society. He advocated state intervention in civil society in order to limit or abolish this form of domination, in order to limit by law the duration and condition of the work in the factory.

RW: There is the famous passage where Marx describes industrial capitalism as "anarchy in production, despotism in the workshop." In other words, haphazard production-for-production's-sake alongside this kind of militarized discipline of industrial labor. But insofar as Marx conceives the modern state as the expression of class domination, the domination of the ruling class over the rest of society, do you believe that a classless society is possible? Because it would seem unclear why a *classless* society would need a state, if the state is only there to express class domination.

DL: On the one hand, Marx speaks along the lines you just laid out. In many texts, Marx and Engels say that the state is the expression of one class's domination over the other. But at other times, they speak of another function of the state. They write that the state functions to implement guarantees between the different individuals of the ruling class, the individual bourgeois. And I don't understand why this second function of the state would disappear. If we have a unified mankind, in this case too there is the necessity of guarantees between individuals within this unified mankind.

Furthermore, we are not allowed to read the thesis of Marx and Engels in a simplistic way. Sometimes they speak of the "withering away" of the state. In other circumstances, however, they speak of the "withering away" in its actual *political* form. These two formulations are very different from one another. But in the history of the communist movement, only the first definition was present, the most simplistic definition: the "withering away" of the state as such. The other formulation is more adequate: the "withering away" of the state in terms of today's political form.

RW: And the other great legacy of liberalism?

DL: The other great legacy of liberalism exists in its understanding of the benefits of competition. And here I am thinking of the market, too, about which I speak positively in my book. We must distinguish different forms of the market. For a long time, the market implied a form of slavery. The slaves were merchandise in the market. The market can assume very different forms. Not that the market is the most important fact. We cannot develop a post-capitalist society, at least for a long time to come, without some form of competition. And this is another great legacy that we can learn from liberalism. **IP**

1. Domenico Losurdo, *Heidegger and the Ideology of War: Community, Death, and the West* (Humanity Press, Amherst NY, 2001).

Art and society, continued from page 2

interest its beholders might have in a beautiful Jane, or even a Jane they might be drawn by the poem to grieve for. For Barthes, our indifference to his mother makes her picture not worth reproducing, but our indifference to Maggie Nelson’s aunt is the desired response. It is precisely the imagination of the beholder’s indifference to the person Jane that marks the ambition to achieve perfection in the poem *Jane*. If the aesthetic of the whole is thus the aesthetic of indifference, the politics it evokes is also, I want to suggest, a politics of indifference: namely, indifference to worries about whether beautiful women should be more grievable than others, or whether anyone should be more grievable than anyone else.

The question of Jane’s beauty and the critique of the idea that it should matter belong, as Nelson herself suggests, to a feminist politics, and more generally to what she calls the cultural moment of the triple liberation of the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, and the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement. These represent liberations from the idea that the lives of white people, straight people, men, are more grievable than others’. The refusal of these hierarchies, the refusal of the hierarchy of grievability, is in Nancy Fraser’s useful shorthand “the politics of recognition,” a politics that is given further specificity by the distinction Fraser makes between recognition and redistribution. This distinction is not itself an opposition, of course; there is no logical contradiction between recognition and redistribution, no reason why a politics seeking to eliminate or minimize class difference could not collaborate with a politics seeking to respect racial and sexual difference. But in practice, beginning in the 1970s, there has been no such collaboration. On the contrary, in the years during which the triple liberations had become central, not only to progressive politics, but also in varying degrees to American society itself, economic inequality of the kind that would be addressed by redistribution, rather than recognition, has radically increased. The increase in inequality, the increased immiseration of the American working and non-working classes, Black, White, Chicano, and Asian, is a phenomenon that does not date to 2008, but on the contrary dates to somewhere between 1969 and 1974 or 1975.

One way to understand the differing fates of recognition, its increasing centrality in redistribution, its increasing marginality, might be just a question of emphasis. In its commitment to social justice, the Left has, for various reasons, focused on issues of identity but not on issues of class for the past generation, at least. Part of the utility of the concept of neoliberalism, if we accept its periodization as primarily a phenomenon of the mid-1970s, is that it helps us see what is misleading about that way of putting the point. It helps us to see instead that the commitment to anti-discrimination at the heart of liberal politics is also at the heart of neoliberal economics, and has been ever since Gary Becker argued that an employer’s racism could only add to his labor costs since, for example, the refusal to hire black labor increased the cost of white labor. Following this line, virtually all neoclassical economists understand racism, sexism, and heterosexism as obstacles to success in competitive markets. This argument about efficiency has been doubled by an ethical argument against preferring one prospective employee over another on the basis of any characteristic not relevant to doing the job. That is, economic commitment to the primacy of markets has been accompanied by an economic and ethical commitment to equality of access to those markets. Thus, far from opposing neoliberalism, the commitment to anti-discrimination is foundational for it. This is not to say that anti-discrimination is always or sufficiently defended in all cases, but only that sexism and racism, and increasingly all inequalities of access to markets, like homophobia, are understood abstractly to be both unproductive and wrong. Inequalities actually *produced* by those markets, unlike inequalities of access to them, are not understood by neoliberal economics to be wrong. By this I mean just that the increasing economic inequalities of neoliberal societies are a problem for neoliberalism only insofar as they are raced or gendered. Those critics whose way of protesting economic inequality consists precisely in focusing on disparities between men and women or Black and White—think of every complaint about the disproportionate poverty of minorities, every complaint about the glass ceiling—are defending the ideals of neoliberalism, not criticizing them. They are protesting the ways in which the raced and gendered subject has been classed; they are not protesting class itself. Another way to put this is just to say that racism and sexism are liberalism today functioning badly; when it is working well, you get economic inequality, which has nothing to do with our feelings of whose lives are more or less grievable.

Just as an alternative to the aesthetics of the grievable is an aesthetics of indifference, the alternative to a politics of the grievable is a politics of indifference. That is, inasmuch as the goal was to minimize inequality, what a class politics requires is redistribution of wealth without regard to the race and gender of the beneficiaries, without regard to whether we see them as inferior, without regard to our regard itself. That is why today it is only *as form* that art does class. Produced by capitalism, rather than racism or sexism, poverty is independent of how we feel about or see the poor, just as the formal unity in the photograph Jane is independent of how we feel about the person Jane. In fact, that independence is the very meaning of the photograph’s unity, of its being a whole. It is in this context that the ambition to produce a perfect work of art has taken on a political meaning and that it has the particular political meaning it has. For the perfect work is one that, asserting the difference between it and the world, asserts its autonomy, an autonomy that in our period may be understood as above all autonomy from—here thematized as indifference to—its reader or beholder. It is the production of the work of art’s difference from the world that counts as the work it does in the world.

Q&A

Professor Pippin, I wonder where a figure like Hölderlin fits in your narrative and, with him, the Romantic notion of the possibility of the transcendent? It seems to me that the



Dan Flavin, “monument” 1 for V. Tatlin, fluorescent lights and metal fixtures, 8’ x 23 1/8” x 4 1/2” [243.8 x 58.7 x 10.8 cm], 1964 (Museum of Modern Art).

crisis of art in modern bourgeois society is also tied to the crisis of religion. Secondly, do the panelists see a parallel between the high modernist aesthetic and what one might call a high modernist politics, which aimed at the abolition of capitalism? In what ways does this differ from a post-modernist aesthetic?

RP: Hölderlin is usually taken to represent a moment of rejection of the emergent forms of civil society that were visible in the early 19th century. He is seen in terms of a nostalgic retreat driven by a deep sense of the fragmentation, disunity, alienation, and anomie of modern life. That is the traditional and perhaps typical reading. A different reading would hinge on a very difficult issue: the politics and the cultural valence of the aesthetic ideal of the beautiful. I say this because Hölderlin certainly represents the last fluorescence of an approach that attributed real philosophical depth to “the Beautiful.” That approach would begin to evaporate after the 1820s–1830s, in the last gasp of the German Romantic Movement. Central to that approach was the conviction that the possibility of the presentation and experience of the beautiful intimates an actual harmony between the fundamental disunifications of modern society, between sensibility and intellect, reason, understanding, and so forth. One way of answering your question is just to say that something like the historical fate of Hölderlin, tied as it was to aspiration of the beautiful, had something to do with the fate of the beautiful, which in the modernist movement ceased to have the same credibility as an aesthetic ideal as it did for the Romantics.

If what you say is true and one presupposition, acknowledged or not, of high modernism is complete non-complicity with the commodification essential to capitalism, then you have to ask what the position of refusal is supposed to entail. If you believe that there is at bottom no reformable moment internal to late capitalism, what do you do, as an intellectual, if there is no longer the Party? That is, after all, the situation that begins to emerge after the failure of the German Revolution in 1918, and intensifies in subsequent moments—the dates 1939, 1956, 1968, 1989, and others stand out. If you’re an intellectual who believes that there is no internally reformable trajectory visible in modern capitalism, what does the rejectionist stand that you attribute to high modernism actually entail, politically? That is a question for which no one has a good answer, really.

MJJ: Can I just ask, are there other artists here in the room? It is unfortunate in panels like this that there is often not a full sense of what contemporary artists are doing, what work they are making. What are their motivations, ethical stances, and commitment to change? Instead, some here are working from a historical position. At the same time, we need to have a pre-modern, a pre-museum, a pre-market sense of what we mean when we say the word “art,” and how some essential reasons for making art still function for artists in society today. As with the examples I pointed to earlier, the actual practice of many artists today seeks join art with life, even to dissolve any such barrier. This has been such an important theme in modernism and essentially in all art.

I want to read something from Foucault that articulates my disappointment in the inability to locate our discussions in what artists today are actually doing. Foucault says, appropriately, “What strikes me is the fact that in our society art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something that is specialized or done by experts who are artists, but couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should a lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?”

But my co-panelists’ presentations still address art as objects, when what Foucault points to is what many artists are dealing with now, which often doesn’t involve art objects at all—at least in the traditional sense—much less worrying about how individual art objects will perform in the market.

WBM: Foucault has been very influential, but actually is one of the early exponents and defenders of neoliberalism. Post-modernism is and has been the more or less official culture of neoliberalism. No doubt, post-modernism is in some sense an avant-garde, but the idea that it has been a politically useful avant-garde is completely mistaken, in my opinion.

I think it is important to go back to the question that Robert was raising, a question I don’t have an answer to, but which is highly significant: He said art, great art, at this moment is going to be rare, and that sounds right. On the other hand I’m very much struck by the fact that there has been a kind of renewal in the last decade, and I think it’s probably above all in photography.

MJJ: To clarify, there is the work of art that you’re referring to, which is done by the artist, and then there is also the work of the artist. Not all artists make works of art, *per se*. Being such a capitalist society, we unfortunately have fewer outlets for artists to be doing that kind of work, because such work doesn’t necessarily involve the creation of a discrete “product.” Moreover, a great deal of art today does not seem interested in participating in the discourse around the question, “What is great art?”

If art offers a way of understanding the possibility for freedom in modern life, characterized by free labor and free love, and if the difficulty of discerning great art in the present speaks to conditions of conformity that affect us all, how do you see the art and artists you have referenced as offering us a real hope of an emancipated future? To what extent do you feel confident in their present transcendent capacity to shed light on the possibilities of our moment?

MJJ: Back to the notion of context, an aesthetic object might give us a sense of freedom, but what happens on our way to even having an experience with that art object? How are we free to even have experience and what do we understand experience to be? When we pay 18 dollars to get into the Art Institute, we enter it knowing that accessing these objects is worth a certain amount. How does this affect our experience of the object? I am interested in artists like Seamus McGuinness who spent five years working with a psychiatrist in Ireland developing the Visual Arts Autopsy to change policies, procedures, and laws within that country, addressing its post-Catholic crisis and the stigmatizations around suicide. The more-than-one-hundred families’ participation in those aesthetic moments of the Visual Arts Autopsy gave them an enormous sense of freedom, agency, and chances for personal change, as well as coming together to institute change.

RP: One important distinction seems to transcend the notion of produced works of art that could be or could resist being commodities, and your life as a work of art. I think the immediate question that one needs to ask, which I would argue is inevitable once the entire category of art is invoked, is not what it would take to make your life a work of art, but what it would mean to make it a *successful* work of art? There has to be a difference between attempting to make your life a work of art and failing, and attempting and succeeding. Perhaps there is another difference, in succeeding very well. The thing I’ve tried to argue very briefly today is that the possibilities of successful art are actually not self-definable by the artist. This has something to do with the issue of the avant-garde, but it also—more fundamentally, I’d argue—depends on shareable conditions for the possibility of non-discursive but nonetheless articulable meaning in a community at a given time. Art has a particular modality of rendering things intelligible. It is non-discursive and it is largely sensible and affective, even as it lends itself to certain forms of discursive articulation. The reliance of artwork of a historical period on various conventional conditions for the possibility of such shareability seems to me inevitable. It is at least conceivable that at certain stages of history it might be reasonable to think that the conditions for such shareability have been so distorted and degraded that it’s very unlikely that anything other than the minimal satisfactions of the conditions of art would prevail.

Art addresses itself to us as individuals, whereas politics by necessity addresses us in some sense as a collective, as humanity as such. I felt like the tension between those two issues, the relationship between the individual and the collective as addressees of art and politics, came out in different ways in each of the talks. Good politics doesn’t assume that the state of humanity in the present is the only possible state of humanity; does good art assume the same?

About the materialist account of art, I would say that art is an object not simply in the sense that it is a thing the artist has made, a “product,” but also in terms of what we might call the “social being” in the work. It seems like an artist can’t really get around the commodity form of the art object today, given that the predominant form of production today is commodity production. In this context, the socially engaged art practices I’ve seen recently seem driven to eliminate metaphor as a way of communicating, and so the art relies on this direct, one-to-one relationship between itself and the audience. On the other hand, with a Hegelian account of art, I feel like there is a problem the degree to which it posits a type of artist who doesn’t really know what he’s doing, but who simply gives form to things that don’t really quite have a form. Such an account seems to imply that it may be better that the artist is completely unaware of what he’s doing, so that later on it’s available for and completely open to interpretation. In such an account, how would it be even theoretically possible for an artist to self-consciously produce a work that’s adequate to the material conditions we live in?

MJJ: Metaphor is something that creates possibility for shared experience, I think. But we also have to look at process. An artist’s process can be deeply invested within a place or within a constituency with people, with their activities. Process can look like the back-and-forth dialogue of permissions and checkpoints as a work develops, as with McGuinness’s project. The work of art also offers possibilities for reflection, and sharing that reflection. Our own individual interpretation of a work of art both deepens our relationship with the work and

becomes the basis for communicative possibility—moving us, as Dewey would say, to the art’s ultimate ends of participation and communication. Your own life that you draw upon for such communication is your experience. You don’t necessarily *need* the art history, or other information; you just need to be aware, remain present in the experience. I’m interested in the possibility of works of art as this kind of mode of social communication.

WBM: If we think about art and politics in terms of the history of art, the question being raised is, what does it mean to make great works of art? Foucault has that well-known remark, which is that people ordinarily know what they do and why they do it; what they don’t know is, what does what they do, do? I think the artist has a pretty good idea of what he or she is doing in making these works—there is the sense of trying to make something like the perfect work of art, with an insistence on form. What I am suggesting is that there is a certain kind of work today that has both the capacity to produce major works of art and the capacity to produce an interesting, significant critique of our contemporary moment and that, in the main, these are not works of art that as their point take up the business of trying to help people. These are works of art that are produced as an attempt to make great works of art.

MJJ: The fact that artists don’t know what the work does comes directly as a definition of art. I don’t think it is controversial to say that art involves both a creative act on the part of the artist and a re-creative act on the part of the viewer, and that those are more or less equal ends. The work of art is not finished when the artist finishes with it.

RP: The “German idea” is that works of art, as works of art, are essentially liberationist: They are connected deeply with the aspiration for the realization for freedom. What that means is an enormous and very thorny issue, but one that has come to the surface several times in our discussion. The idea that there could be a sensible embodiment of an intended meaning that is uniquely sensible, but shareable, evokes a resolution of the central modern antimony concerning freedom: We are corporeal, spacio-temporal objects, and at the same time we are subjects. With respect to our discussion today, the idea is that art preserves the possibility of this unity, as a kind of anticipation of its full realization, and this anticipation consists in the moment of actual sensible embodiment of an intended meaning in the artwork. The reason it’s supposed to be a moment of potential liberation is that the circulation and shareability of that meaning is in some way to be viewed, can be viewed, as the expression of free and equal subjects in a communicative relation of a sort that isn’t in the interest of anyone. Stating it so baldly makes it seem naïve, perhaps. This wouldn’t mean that art would not involve ideas, nor does it mean that the artist must remain ignorant of those ideas. However, I do think it is hard to imagine how art made—“in advance,” so to speak—specifically in service of certain ideas, could serve the ideal of freedom that this framework articulates. Nor is this freedom art points to, in this conception, simply the occasion for the individual to explore his or her own psyche; it is not the freedom that self-expression, *per se*, can express. This aspect I’ve tried to draw attention to, this shareability without the interests of anyone being served by the regime of shareability, is the aspiration that art embodies just by being art.

The discussion of the German idealist notion of freedom makes me wonder about fascism: Can great art be reactionary?

RP: I think of art as a normative term. That is, fascist art is not art; it’s just a *façon de parler* to call it art. It doesn’t achieve the conditions of art, so it’s not art. But then, of course, you would raise the question: How do you distinguish between bad art and good art? To put it most radically, there’s no such thing as bad art. Rather, that art which doesn’t achieve the condition of art, is not art.

WBM: Many of the major modernist poets of the first half of the 20th century completely understood themselves as fascists. Ezra Pound would only be the most obvious example. We could think of this as a discrepancy between Pound’s aesthetic commitments—that is, the kind of art he thought he was trying to make—and his political commitments. However, he himself was entirely convinced. Indeed, many lines in *The Cantos* do explicitly profess sentiments that could only be attributed to Italian fascism. If you’re going to say that it can’t be great art if it’s fascist then you are going to have to say either Pound’s *Cantos* suck—which is a very implausible claim for anybody who is interested in the history of poetry—or you’re going to have to say that the thing that makes them great art somehow disconnects them from the fascism that they themselves profess. There is no question, moreover, that fascism had a profound aesthetic component; however, it does not follow from this acknowledgment that there are therefore great works of fascist art.

MJJ: This, too, is a question in the design field. What is good design? One could conceivably create a very well-designed crematorium in a Nazi death camp. So we come to a question of values and ends. I think we work from personal values, which come about in terms of our position and our perspective within society. Those are things that form personal ethics and larger civic ethics. Those have everything to do with making art, making design, and living life.

WBM: Indeed, it raises the question of the relevance of the artist’s ethics, and even of the artist’s politics, to the politics of the work of art. I am skeptical of the idea that people’s political intentions and political motives have much to do with the politics of the works of art they produce. However, their aesthetic intentions, their aesthetic motives, have a great deal to do with their politics. **IP**

Transcribed by Carrie Graham and Divya Menon Kohn

Changes in art and society

A view from the present

Mary Jane Jacob, Robert Pippin, and Walter Benn Michaels

On March 31, 2012, the Platypus Affiliated Society invited Mary Jane Jacob [School of the Art Institute of Chicago], Robert Pippin [University of Chicago], and Walter Benn Michaels [University of Illinois at Chicago] to speak on the theme of “Changes in Art and Society: A View from the Present” at the 2012 Platypus International Convention held at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The original description of the event reads as follows:

Hegel famously remarked that the task of philosophy was to “comprehend its own time in thought.” In a sense, we can extend this as the *raison d’être* for artistic production, albeit in a modified way: Art’s task is to “comprehend its own time in form.” Yet only with the revolutionary rise of modernity can this dictum make sense. Beginning in the 18th century, art sought to register and materialize the way in which social consciousness changed alongside the developing material conditions of social life. Thus, in times of great social transformation, we also bear witness to major shifts in artistic production: The French Revolution and David, The Revolutions of 1848 and Courbet, and the Russian Revolution and Suprematism and Constructivism are three major examples. This panel focuses on the relationship between social and aesthetic transformation.

The panelists were asked several questions in order to flesh out the uneven and, at times, obscure relationship that art has with a society that is constantly in flux. Full video of the event can be found online at <<http://vimeo.com/41013265>>. What follows is an edited transcript of the event.

Mary Jane Jacob: Terms like the avant-garde and the underpinnings of modernism are still at the heart of the motivations and activity of many artists—not necessarily in terms of style, but in terms of contributing to changing society. I would like to point to a few concepts at play: a huge part of contemporary art-making is concerned with the dematerialized, not art that is a static object traded on the marketplace; second, it often involves collaboration, which raises questions of authorship on the part of the artist, questions of voice on the part of collaborators, and questions of participation in general; and thirdly, there is a new look to the question of effectiveness in this context—not just the affect of art—and so we should ask, effectiveness to what end?

Here are a few examples. In the 1990s, Christopher Sperandio and Simon Grennan worked with the Chicago Confectioner’s Union at a Nestlé plant to design their own candy bar, including a memorable advertising campaign. The candy bar was sold in stores. Just last night, I was driving south on Halsted; the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) has changed so dramatically since 1993, when Daniel J. Martinez did a major public intervention there. For all of the 20th century the Maxwell Street Market was a center of a kind of open commerce; then UIC and the city joined forces to make it a campus village. So Martinez’s peoples’ plaza—he knew these redevelopment plans would come in 15–20 years—harkened back to labor events staged in that area, like the McCormick Reaper Strike or the Haymarket Riot, along with world events throughout history. The Chicago collaborative Haha worked on



From 1992 to 1995 the art group Haha cultivated a hydroponic garden, with a focus on nutritional vegetables and therapeutic herbs, in a Chicago storefront.

AIDS awareness in their project *Flood*, teaching kids at once about hydroponics and safe sex, but also coming to a deeper understanding of the epidemic, with each of some 50 members working during the course of the project within the larger AIDS healthcare network. In West Town, Inigo Manglano-Ovalle’s worked with youth to deconstruct their own images in the media and take control of creating their own images in neighborhood-based forms of presentation, culminating in a huge, 75-monitor video installation along an entire residential block. While the artwork was temporary, it permanently exists in the form of the organization Street Level Youth Media, now about to celebrate its twentieth year.

Though drawn from Chicago, these examples participate in a worldwide movement of artists whose practice consists in taking action into their own hands—sometimes as gestures, sometimes as provocations—in an Alinskian drive to create permanent change. In Puerto Rico, for instance, when the government was about to do away with what they considered a squatters’ village in the mountains, Chemi Rosado painted everyone’s house green so that the community would blend in

with the mountain. Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Rirkrit Tiravanija, an alum of SAIC, founded the *Land Project* in Chiang Mai, Thailand, as a kind of experimental studio for artists and designers, but also for developing bio-gas and other kinds of alternative energy engineering, while, at the same time, farming a rice field with a nearby community that has been devastated by AIDS. Or consider Artway of Thinking, a collective that will be with SAIC this summer, whose projects are often funded by the EU. One project looked at seafarers’ plight around the world and particularly in their homeland of Mestre, Venice. In response to this multi-layered, multi-year art project, a number of actions took place that led to change, among them the creation of two agencies dedicated to services for seafarers and new, more equitable policies regarding access when they are at port. Another one of their projects involved working with 13 provincial governments in Italy to change the law so that people can work legally in Italy while seeking asylum.

We are initiating a research project at SAIC on artists’ social practices in Chicago. My hope is that in the next few years we will explore the relationship between art and social change as it has been practiced in this city and intersects with the thinking and actions here since 1900.

Robert Pippin: The people I look to for help understanding the fate of art in bourgeois society are Kant, Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, the Schlegel brothers, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Adorno, Marcuse, and Heidegger.

The historical events—the simple facts—that define the social reality of the present are not much in dispute. Most count the September 15, 2008 collapse of the massive investment bank, Lehman Brothers—what is sometimes, quite revealingly, referred to as “letting Lehman fail”—as the signal event. It was followed by the nationalization of Fanny May and Freddie Mac, in the hastily conceived, 700 million dollar bailout. With that came the sudden and deep freezing of the international credit markets, the near total ruin of the economy of Iceland, the bankruptcy of Latvia, the destruction, in a little over a year, of what is estimated to be 50 trillion dollars in assets. All of this is well known, but still not well understood. In fact we seem to be drifting rapidly, as if inexorably, back into the same form of finance capitalism that produced the crisis in the first place.

Because these events have not produced even a roughly agreed-upon explanation, their significance remains unclear. The idea that global capitalism may have finally reached its long predicted death spiral is plausible: It appears unable to grow at rates that will provide minimal stability (usually estimated at around 3 percent) and unable to find any novel way to sustain itself without such growth, and all of this for various reasons having to do with unmanageable periodic liquidity crises and the inability of national governments, especially the U.S., to debt-finance their way out of such a crisis, hemmed in by domestic conservatives, foreign creditors, and the massive size of the current deficit—the U.S. has been borrowing at the rate of about 2 billion dollars a day for many years now. That ever more obviously dire consequences will result from our reliance on polluting technology to promote the rapid but deadly modernization that would insure markets for the excess liquidity—or that there may not even be sufficient space on the globe for such expansion—is, I think, a depressingly persuasive argument. And it is persuasively made,

sketched above. Specifically, by talking about the present in terms of the situation of bourgeois society, after the basic institutions necessary for that society began to come into view in the mid-19th century and afterwards, many aspects of which were the subjects of realist and modernist art. I mean by this the establishment of a domain of privacy created mostly by the bourgeois nuclear family; the establishment of the political public sphere; the reconstruction of marriage around the romantic love of partners, eventually equal partners who chose their own mates; what was so famously, and what still should be called, the fetishization of commodities; the establishment of mass consumer societies based in nation-states; and the increasing reliance on technology to produce the expansion and growth necessary to sustain competitive market societies.

I will assume that many of these aspects are well known and uncontroversial. But at that altitude, we can also say something equally abstract and, at such a level, a bit banal, about art. If we accept that in earlier forms of Western societies, works of great artistic genius were possible—a highly contested claim—then it has become a commonplace to say that the form of life coming into view in Paris and London in the mid-19th century made the production and appreciation of art of that quality, or at least the consensual recognition of such art, much more difficult. Perhaps there might be such art, but the importance of there being such art, its significance, would have changed radically and would have been greatly reduced. Something like this might have been Hegel’s position, which was the first to claim that in modern bourgeois societies, the greatness of art had become a thing of the past. For others, the social institution of art was eventually unable, after the failure of the heroic resistance of high modernism, to resist its commercialization, commodification, and eventual trivialization in the likes of Damien Hirst or Dan Flavin.

I don’t mean to refer to anything much about the implications of the commodity form of value, as such, but to another, deeper problem. The production of art works—let us say, easel paintings—inevitably assumes the possibility of some shareable and non-discursive



Damien Hirst, *Pharmacy*, glass, faced particle board, painted medium density fiberboard, beech and ramin woods, dowels, aluminum, pharmaceutical packaging; dimensions variable, 1992 [Tate Modern].

but primarily sensible, affective, form of intelligibility. If there isn’t such a distinct form, there isn’t art. Moreover, under the historical assumptions about meaning influentially insisted on by Hegel, the conventions necessary for such assumptions to be reasonable change over time. At some basic level, we need to understand that change before we can understand the possibilities of its specific modalities, like aesthetic modalities of shareable meaning.

These same considerations are in play in other bodily incorporations of meaning, for instance in the bodily movements we count as actions. There is some kind of crisis if actions taken by agents to be of certain types are not taken to be such actions by many others. Rousseau began an account of those conditions and their implications: Modern societies had created novel and profoundly deep forms of dependencies, in a novel and profoundly deep way—most famously, but not exclusively, the dependencies that result from ever more divided, specialized, and thus alienated labor. To make Rousseau’s long story short, this situation created a great social pressure for ignoring, for suppressing via conformism, for rendering invisible by various means the vast social inequalities that such unequal positions of dependence and relative independence would inevitably produce. This is the situation that would later be intelligibly called “dialectical.” The social relations and fundamental inequalities of modern capitalism greatly weaken the possibility of common conventions that could be shared in meaningfully fulfilling ways; rather, these sorts of tensions tended to be anaesthetized by a conformity-inducing redirection of human desire to what everyone else desired.

From Hegel to Adorno, the realm of the aesthetic has been called the realm of the negative—that which is not expressible in discursive articulation and so possibly resistant to those processes of conformism. For Hegel, “negative” did not mean unintelligible, but involved bearing truth in its own way, preserving some distinct mode of genuinely shareable meaning, or at least an aspiration for genuinely shareable meaning. The first expression of the crisis of aesthetic modernism was such negativity: the diminishing credibility of the traditional aesthetic forms that had previously made possible such sensible mutual recognition. The painterly conventions of illusionism, perspective, sculptural modeling to evoke solidity, or the traditions of genre, the nude, the ideal—these are all refused, all at once, in Manet’s *Olympia*, for example. Aesthetic intelligibility would from now on be immensely more difficult because continued reliance upon such conventions came to evoke conformism, a kind of *enforced* traditionalism, in the face of the looming possibility that prior assumptions about shareability of meaning were becoming irrelevant.

The events of 2008 have not changed any of this, and have added, as an even more effective conformity-inducing phenomenon, a shared mood—namely, deep anxiety—and the kind of neurotic, racist hysteria we see in the Tea Party movement. What we should expect is, at the very least, something very simple: that the occurrence of great art—art that escapes the kind of social conventions necessary for a mass consumer society to sustain the conditions of its own survival, but still manages to embody a kind of shareable meaning not anticipated and normalized by such conventions—will

be extremely rare. Perhaps so extremely rare as to be acknowledgeable and appreciated only many years after its appearance.

Walter Benn Michaels: Maggie Nelson’s collection of poems, *Jane: A Murder*, centers on the murder of Nelson’s aunt Jane in 1969, four years before Nelson herself was born. At the time, and for a long while after, it was thought that Jane’s death was one of what were thought to be the “Michigan murders”: seven young women killed in Washtenaw county, Michigan, over a period of two years. In 1970 a man was arrested and convicted for what turned out to be the last of the murders. The assumption was that he had probably killed Jane. And *Jane* itself, the book, is written on that theory. As the book was going to the press, however, Nelson learned that a different man had been arrested for Jane’s murder. Her next book, *The Red Parts*, is about the trial and conviction of that man. Edgar Allan Poe makes an appearance in *The Red Parts*. Watching a TV show about the murder of a “beautiful Peace Corps volunteer in Tonga,” Nelson was taken aback to hear someone on the show explain his obsession with this crime by referring to Poe, who “once declared the death of a beautiful woman to be the most poetic topic in the world.” But while Poe was only incidental for *The Red Parts*, he is central to *Jane*.

One way that Nelson imagines this centrality is as a critique of Poe’s sexual poetic, which she suggests in an interview is an example of what she calls the ethically unsound practice of treating beautiful women as if their lives were “more grievable,” because somehow more valuable, than others. Hence it matters to her that Jane, unlike the Peace Corps volunteer, was not particularly beautiful. Indeed, she puts Jane’s picture on the cover of the book at least partially to prove it. But the picture plays another role as well, one that matches the other interest Nelson has in Poe. As she tells the interviewer, Poe made this comment in his *Philosophy of Composition* while describing, with what seems to be at least some glibness, how to make the perfect poem. The ambition to make the perfect poem—which is, she says, also a

part of her book *Jane*—is not easily dismissed. The idea that a woman ought to be beautiful is one thing, the idea that a work of art ought to be perfect is another, and the idea that the beauty of a work of art is its perfection is something else. Nelson herself insists on this difference. A poem near the end of *Jane* begins, “Does it matter if I tell you now that Jane was not beautiful?” It goes on to describe Jane, her skin, white and chalky, her eyes set close together. It ends with a description of Nelson’s favorite photo of Jane, her face half bleached out, and the point is no longer that Jane is not beautiful, but that the picture is beautiful. The poem’s last words are, “the whole picture is beautiful.” The beauty of the photo is made out of someone who is not beautiful. More precisely, the kind of beauty the photo attains has nothing to do with the kind of beauty that the person in the photo might or might not have. This is emphasized by the insistence that it is the “whole picture” that is beautiful; the invocation of the whole calls attention in particular to the form of the work of art, to its ambition to be perfect, in a way that no person can ever be. We might say that just as the photograph of Jane must be made beautiful even though its subject is not, the poem *Jane* must be made into a whole even though the occasion of its production, Jane’s death, is loss.

There is a difference between the question of whether the person needs to be beautiful and the question of whether the poem ought to be perfect. This difference might plausibly be understood as the difference between a set of ethical or even political concerns, and a set of aesthetic ones. For example, the question of whether some lives are or should be more grievable than others might be understood as political in a way that the question of the possible beauty or perfection of the work of art is not. But this opposition, emptying the aesthetic of the political, is certainly not one that Nelson would herself accept, and in fact we might better understand the politics of the grievable as opposed, not to a set of aesthetic concerns, but to another politics, for which the question of grievability would not arise, or at least would not be primary. Similarly, we might understand the aesthetic of perfection as opposed, not to the political as such, but to *another* aesthetic, distinguished by its repudiation of the commitments that accompany the entire intellectual apparatus of perfection.

In photography, the most brilliant and influential exponent of the aesthetic of the grievable would be Roland Barthes, for whom the most important thing about the photograph, the *punctum*, was the element that shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces the beholder. That is why the most important photograph in Barthes’ wonderful book about photography, *Camera Lucida*, is the one we do not see, as it is not in the book: the picture of Barthes’ mother. The reason we do not see it is that it would not pierce us; she is his mother, not ours. For us, he says, “It would be nothing but an indifferent picture.” When Nelson reproduces the photo of Jane, she is going against both Barthes’ practice—Jane was her aunt, not ours, but she includes the photograph—as well as his theory. It is the picture defined in terms of its internal relations, face and torso against the sky, and thus turned into a whole, that Nelson finds beautiful. It is, in other words, the picture disconnected from the